

s e r e i n

serein: suh • ran. n. fine rain falling after sunset from a sky in which no clouds are visible.

< by **nathaniel e. trent** >

dear olivia,

today i met a little girl. she seemed to think that i was her shadow, or maybe just a shadow.

it's quite sad, you know, for me to meet someone and know that one day i will have to find them in death.

death

dear death,

from what i understand, this is your job.

i try to refrain from befriending the living, for it hurts to know that one day they will be passed onto you—and i shall never see them again. it is a sad experience.

olivia

dear olivia,

yes, this is my job. it is a job i never applied for, and i have been doing for as long as i remember,
which is quite a long time.

do you remember when i was born, if you were there then? or did i exist for you? it is all a confusing
situation.

death

dear death,

i do not remember when you were born, mr. death; i think this is because you were not born at all. i think you are like me, an entity bordering on nonexistence and existence. you see, mr. death, i am an entity essential for the creation of life, and you are an entity essential for the destruction of aforementioned noun.

to put it simply, without you the world would be a complete overpopulated shithole. for me to exist, i would need you to exist as well.

olivia

dear olivia,

thank you; that explains a lot. for the last eternity, i have been endlessly collecting souls for my own keeping. i have jars filled with them, and as i gaze at them through the darkness right now, i see that they resemble stars in the sky. i love it. my dwelling is but an infinitely-large expanse of darkness.

today i met that little girl again. humans are strange creatures. the girl, her name is samatha, is 6 years old; her mother is—or was, i should say—pregnant with twins. my first visit was to collect a soul from her first loss, and this visit was to collect the second. each time the girl was completely unaware of the purpose to what i was doing.

“what are you doing with my mommy?” she asked me when i entered their home. i could not speak; i had broken that rule once, i should not do it again. i took the soul of her now dead unborn sibling and left. as i walked through the doorway, she said, “goodbye. i hope to see you again.”

“no, little one,” i wanted to say; “that would be quite unfortunate.”

death

dear death,

that story was quite depressing. i do understand the girl's ignorance, though; often, i am not one to judge. i see many forms of life, some intelligent, some creative, some stupid, and some delayed. it is up to myself to decide how i perceive these individuals, and i see them all as my children.

what do you see them as?

olivia

dear olivia,

i see them as they are; humans. i cannot help but to allow my personal opinions on them bubble to the surface. you see, it is much easier to see something in a positive light when you create it. but i do not create; i destroy, per say, and i have no regard for the lives of the living or the dead. i am not allowed to become attached to any form of life, and that is why i do not allow myself to break the rules, except for with samantha. i couldn't stop myself.

death

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dear death,

why is that, anyways?

olivia

dear olivia,

and i was beginning to think you were smart.

death

dear death,

i presume you thought i was asking, "why can't you befriend any living being," when i actually meant,
"why can't you speak to anyone?"

you're speaking to me now, aren't you? and why did you break the rules with samantha?

olivia

dear olivia,

you see, it is different with you and i. as you explained, we are both nonexistential entities, whereas humans and animals and such are not. as for samantha, i allowed myself to speak with her because she seemed to have an idea as to who i was.

“are you a shadow?” she asked me. it was late at night; her mother and father were sleeping, but she—for some reason—was awake. “she is close,” i thought to myself. i am much like a shadow. the possibility of me is more like a shadow, though. it follows each human, growing larger as they grow larger, meaning that the chances of my appearance are also growing. you see, dear olivia, death is like a shadow; it lingers, until it inevitably happens.

“something like that,” was all i said, and i moved on. she followed me and watched. she didn't say anything for the rest of my visit.

death

dear death,

if we were nonexistential entites, neither of us would exist; we would not be able to communicate, or to commune from our dwellings to the living world. i think it better to explain us as ghosts. but, as to take from human philosophy: you are what you make yourself to be. if you act like a monster, you will soon become one. if you act like a hero, the same thing will happen.

i'm not sure if it works in the way of, if you act like a human you will become one. this is especially difficult when no one can sense you or your presence..

olivia

dear olivia,

i don't think of myself as great. i am rather peacefull, actually; i see myself as humble.

i know i'm not the best and that's all that matters.

death

dear death,

i am pretty great. i mean, i do create thousands of lives every day and i am an overwhelming wealth of knowledge and experience. i know and understand even the bad things in life, and all the living things come from me.

olivia

dear olivia,

has anyone ever told you that you're kind of an arrogant bitch?

i'm not the smartest person, nor am i the kindest (that is one thing i am more than well-aware of). but the souls i collect speak to me, all at once, and sometimes i hear things. i hear things about god, about life, and about knowledge. most of it is very difficult for me to comprehend. but, if there is one thing i know for sure, it is that i am in no way perfect. i am in no way great.

i've been thinking lately, and i've decided to call you 'liv. it's a play-on-words, you see? "liv" is pronounced the same way "live" is, and it's also short for olivia. you're like me—i'm death, and, essentially, you're life, but now you are 'liv.

death

dear death,

i have been called many things, but arrogant has not been one of them—until now. i can see how you'd get the impression of me being arrogant, but i will say this now, no matter what any human or existential-nonexistential entity may say, i am the reason as to why you exist.

also i really like that name. i haven't really ever had someone to call me something. i just call myself olivia.

'liv

dear 'liv,

today i went to a funeral. i don't know about you, but i hate funerals with the burning passion of a thousand souls that suffered slow, painful deaths in life.

i was at the funeral, watching as everyone mourned the loss of a life. this is one thing i hate, because i feel as if a funeral should be more to commemorate and celebrate a person contrary to mourning their death with their body on display. i think that the fact that humans are sad when a life is lost clearly shows that they are your creations.

a woman, about mid-fifties, had a heart attack while crying her heart out—quite literally. i took her soul and left, because i wanted no more to be a part of such a pathetic gathering.

oh how i clearly despise the customs of such humans.

death

dear death,

i love each and everyone one of my children. i cannot fathom why you could come to hate them. i think it's just because of our personalities, and our purposes; you are made to take life, i am made to give it. that is that.

my dwelling was ever-so beautiful the other night. i could see all of the stars in the galaxy, it was so clear; i observed a supernova and a comet flying by earth. i think this is what life is about, beauty, but clearly not all of my creations see it that way. i did not instruct humans to participate in funerals, or develop fictitious gods, or anything of what they do. i simply allowed their biology—their evolutionary emotions and the chemicals in their brain to do the work i cannot.

'liv

dear 'liv,

i see. i should not get so angry about such things.

death

dear death,

anger is an emotion i am not capable of. i think you are only capable of it because you are death, and death is usually a negative thing.

'liv

dear 'liv,

if i were a human i would want to change the world.

death

dear death,

me too. but sadly, we are not humans, and i do not know of any other entities like us.

'liv

dear 'liv,

lately i've been listening to some souls tell me about some philosophy. one speaks of this theory called "schrödinger's cat," and i do not agree with this at all. the theory states that if you lock a cat in a box with some deadly substance, the cat will either be dead or a live when you open the box, but until you open it you do not know, so your ignorance means that the cat is neither dead or alive. i do not agree with this at all. even if you do not know if the cat is dead or alive, he is still one of the two. it would be pretty easy for me to tell, because if the cat had died i would have its soul, and if it didn't die i wouldn't have its soul.

humans confuse me.

apparently the whole thing has to do with quantum mechanics, but i do not know what those are.

death

dear death,

i know a lot of things. just about everything that goes through all of the minds of humans, also goes through me.

quantum mechanics has to deal with subatomic particles, but i think it's safe to assume that you don't know what those are so let's just leave it at that. you'll find out soon enough.

dear 'liv,

i do not know of a lot of things. i do not know of quantum mechanics, nor subatomic particles, nor atomic particles. one of the spirits whispered to me as i read your letter:

“ignorance is bliss,” he said.

i agree with this fully. too many times do i see humans not believing in god and they fear death because they see it as an ultimate end. i like to see the humans who worship god and expect heaven, because they will not be sentient to experience the afterlife with me, whispering their knowledge into my ears.

death

dear death,

i fear the death of my children just as much as they do. it's nothing personal against you, it just pains me to see the last bit of fear within their soul before you take it.

'liv

dear 'liv,

i'm sorry i cause fear within them. i did not know.

i had to pay another visit to the young girl, samantha. she is much older now. she recognized me, i can tell, but she did not say anything. i will not speak of my visit anymore, because it pains me to do so. i may tell of it another time, when i am not weighed on so heavily emotionally.

death

dear death,

i hate emotions dearly. i rarely fear them, for i look at all things in an objective view. i hate how i constantly look upon humans and find them making choices based on their subjective emotion, and those choices ending detrimentally. i hate seeing my children in despair.

'liv

dear 'liv,

are you god?

death

dear death,

i am nothing of the like.

'liv

dear 'liv,

then why do you call all of hte living things your children?

death

dear death,

i do not know.

i guess it is a thing i have always done. it gives me some consolodation to know that i am the reason
they live, i guess. it hurts that i cannot help them though.

'liv

dear 'liv,

i, sadly, cannot experience that with anyone.

i do not give. i take.

death

dear death,

i am sorry to hear that. i will hope for you to one day experience the gift of giving.

'liv

dear 'liv,

i think it time for me to tell you why i was so sad about my latest visit to samantha and her family and why i was so upset about it.

samantha is now 7, almost 8, and she has grown much since the death of her unborn twin brothers. but tragedy has stricken her family, and her mother has taken her own life out of sadness and grief. i wish i would have said something the day she lost her last brother, but sadly i did not. nor did i say anything to day, though it seemed as if she knew the reason as to why i was present in her home.

oh, it hurts to see a human cry.

death

dear death,

the case of this samantha girl is quite depressing, luckily she still has her father. does she have any live
siblings?

'liv

dear 'liv

i do not think so, and i fear that her father will meet a fate similar to her mother's, if not worse. i pray that her words "i hope to see you again," were not a curse upon her family.

death

dear death,

if i could dictate the actions of humans, i would force her dad into a love, and a child, and bring that girl a better life. but i find this a perfect display of how detrimental action upon emotions can be.

'liv

dear 'liv,

i love to listen to souls whisper about their lives. i recently have taken to the jarred soul of a poet, who constantly tells me fantastical stories of exaggerated exploits and novels he had not gotten to write.

he tells me of one about an extraordinary prince-gone adventurer; the prince was exiled from his kindgom after the assassination of the king was pinned on him. i listened to the whole thing as the soul whispered it to me, the wonderful prose flowing through the darkness. it was quite a beautiful experience.

though sometimes i am sad i am not a human, i am also grateful i can still experience complex emotions.

death

dear death,

sometimes emotions are better than numbness.

'liv

dear 'liv,

that's very insightful. you are quite an intelligent entity, for living between existence and
nonexistence.

death

dear death,

i'm starting to grow quite fond of the name 'liv. i feel as if it suits me quite well.

you were right. it is the name for me. if only i had more people to call me by it.

'liv

dear 'liv,

after millions of years of experiencing life from its most basic units and observing its evolution into humans, i seem to have a good grasp on what people have taken a liking to. it seems that people like what they relate to.

death

dear death,

how many souls have you collected all together?

'liv

dear 'liv,

i do not know. i am afraid i lost count around 1 trillion, but i do know this:

almost 110 billion humans have ever lived, alone. i have collected 110 billion human souls, and masses more of animal souls and alien souls.

every day more and more people die from more and more causes. every day, around 100,000 humans die. my work is never done, but luckily i can retire to my domain, which means i can stop time to relax myself.

i collect 200 human souls in a minute and masses more animal souls.

if i had the time, patience, and capacity to listen to each and every soul whisper their knowledge, i would never finish. it would be impossible for me to listen to souls faster than i could collect them. it is a curse, but at the same time a blessing; i have an overwhelming wealth of knowledge at my disposal, but no way to access all of it.

death

dear death,

if you need to know something, you can just ask me.

'liv

dear 'liv,

that is a kind offer. i may take you up on that.

why are we the only entities between existentiality and nonexistentiality?

death

dear death,

i feel as if it is because we are the only necessary beings. i am needed to create life, and you are needed for death. without either of us, there would be nothing, and without one of us, equilibrium would be impossible to achieve.

'liv

dear 'liv,

that is very true.

i find myself getting more and more enticed with schrödinger's cat. the thought experiment (last time, i incorrectly called it a theory) says that humans, by looking into the box in which the cat is held, forces nature to make a decision about whether the cat is dead or not. though i do not necessarily agree with this, i do agree with the next part, which states that it is possible that the outcome we experience is just one possible outcome, and all other possibilities occur throughout a larger multi-verse.

its made me wonder, is there a world in which you are me and i am you? or is it really true that we, by looking inside the box, force nature to make a decision? i keep thinking that maybe, if i hadn't gone to earth that day to collect souls, samantha would still have her (albeit depressed) mother.

it is a very interesting concept. i like to learn.

death

dear death,

your letters have been quite long lately. i feel sorry due to my being cursory. i, unlike you, have all of the time in the world. i do not spend long hours creating souls, they simply feed off of me, i think. it would be what the humans call a spiritual energy, per say.

i nourish their souls, essentially. without me, you would be out of a job, and life would not be possible, but sometimes i wonder... why are we possible?

there is no god. we are the closest possible. but we had to be created by... something.

i seem to have encountered an existential crisis.

'liv

dear 'liv,

your short letters are of no bother, i simply enjoy taking time to sit down and read them and write a response, even if the response is one-sentence long, as it often is.

i checked up on samantha today. she is doing quite fine, from the looks of things. but have no alarm, i did not go to her to collect a soul. i was merely interested in her state of mind. i am afraid sorrow still weighs heavily on her soul.

she's almost 10 now. i think it's good to get the deaths of the family out of the way, because as a child grows older they are no longer able to remember the pain they experienced. i predict that by the time she turns fourteen, all of her pain will be behind her, and she will have a happy life.

death

dear death,

if i could, i would try my hardest to intervene and make her a happy girl, but i cannot.

sometimes we must sit and observe, because the only thing left to do is to allow the person to help themselves.

i took a walk today. i watched a star die.

some things are actually quite beautiful in this universe.

'liv

dear 'liv,

what do you look like?

i sometimes pass mirrors, and sometimes i look into them. rarely do i see myself; i am not a black-cloaked man with a scythe. i am merely just a long, tall being, identical to a shadow but 3-dimensional contrary to 2.

have you ever seen yourself inside a mirror?

death

dear death

i do not know what i look like. keep in mind that i, unlike you, am incapable of inter-dimensional travel; i cannot come down to the earth and walk amongst the humans. i am trapped in space, i think. i have pale, white hands and legs. that is all i can tell you.

'liv

dear 'liv,

i imagine that you look something like samantha, but adult. i imagine you with short, blonde hair and pale, fair skin and freckles. i do not know what color eyes you have, though; nor can i guess how tall or short you are.

a spirit whispered to me the other night, "little do we know about our appearance, for we only see ourselves in photographs and in mirrors," and that kind of screwed with me a little.

death

dear death,

that's pretty deep. makes me think of why whatever—or whoever—created humans didn't make them
with eyes that they could use to look at themselves.

'liv

dear 'liv,

are you aware of what “meditation is?”

oh, what am i saying. of course you're aware of it. recently, i decided to try it out. i didn't do any of that lining-up your chakra bullshit, but i did lie down and clear my mind. i found it very beneficial. you should try it.

death

dear death,

meditation has several mental benefits, some include helping anxiety and depression.

the only downside would be that i don't think you, death, have depression. that would be quite ironic.

'liv

dear 'liv,

i'm not aware of what depression feels like, nor anxiety. i have nothing to be anxious about, nor depressed.

i know that most humans get sad over thinking things that aren't true.

i am aware that no one likes me, because there is no one to like me.

i am aware that there is no one—except for you, maybe—who cares for me.

but i am also aware that i am important. i matter. i am necessary.

death

dear death,

that's beautiful.

i matter, too. i am necessary as well.

i can't help but feel that in this case i am merely a follower.

'liv

dear 'liv,

i am the follower,, for i succeed you.

death

dear death,

i mean in the sense of feeling value, not how you took it.

'liv

dear life,

today i witnessed a very... insightful argument.

a husband and wife. they are standing in their parlor room, screaming at one another.

i stopped to watch, for the emotional ordeals of humans intrigue me.

they were arguing about something with their children—apparently, the man used to be a good father, but now that was all going down the drain. their kids, gladly, were not present at the house. i do not know where they were.

“you've changed and i can't stand it,” the wife told him, to which her husband said, “i didn't change, my mask just fell off.

“i'm tired of adhering to society and their rules. i shouldn't have gotten myself in this far. i just want to be my own person, not anchored to responsibilities and family. i can't do this anymore.”

i thought the first part of that was rather accurate.

people don't change, their masks just fall off.

death

dear death,

for some reason, i can't help but think that "removing your mask," would be to expose yourself to the world, though i am aware that it just means to reveal your true self. i feel as if i am not as intelligent as you, in a critical-thinking sense.

i witnessed the collision of two galaxies today. it was a display of such beauty i wish i could have shared it with you.

'liv

dear life

maybe i am. maybe i'm just insightful. who knows?

death

dear death,

i have not noticed until now, but i must ask: why do you address your letters, "dear life," now? what happened to 'liv?

'liv

dear life,

i started to feel left out. it was odd; you and i are essentially counterparts, but you have an actual name whereas i am just simply "death". you can keep your sign-off, though.

it's simply a me thing.

death

dear death,

i think i should give you a name, since you gave me one.

“dauda” is icelandic for “death.” i think i could shorten it to “daud,” would that be okay?

alternatively, “tod” is german for “death.”

you pick which one.

'liv

dear 'liv,

they both sound good. i don't know.

i think like daud better.

(i feel like a little kid in a candy shop, honestly, trying to decide what to buy. i don't think anyone has ever been nice enough to give me an actual name before. i got mine from what people said when i came around.)

daud

dear daud,

that's borderline sad, but at the same time it makes me feel accomplished. i'm glad i could be the person to give you appreciation and attention in life, if we can even call what you and i experience that.

i think it would be more of a sentence.

'liv

dear 'liv,

i agree that our lives are more of a sentience; we do not experience birth or death, we just *are*.

i do not know what that is, but i do know that it is not living.

daud

dear daud,

i am envious of stars. they have lives; they are birthed by a process in which gravity brings nebulous formations in space into one ball and nuclear fusion begins to occur. once they are out of the hydrogen they use to turn into helium, they begin to die. their death can occur in many ways, just like the deaths of humans.

i wish i could die.

i hate this everlastingness of my life. i hate being immortal. i hate not having a beginning and an end.

am i depressed?

'liv

dear 'liv,

i do not think it would be possible for you, a being that doesn't truly exist but also doesn't not-exist, could experience mental illness, but i am not a psychologist, nor a psychiatrist, nor any kind of psych person.

sometimes, i think i am depressed, but then i think “hey, you're not really real, you can't be depressed.”

daud

dear daud,

that is true. i should put forth greater effort into thinking i am not depressed, and then maybe my depression will go away—if it existed at all.

'liv

dear 'liv,

i am in very sad spirits right now.

samantha's family has met yet another tragedy.

i do not know the specifics, but it appears that after the death of samantha's mother, her father lost his job. he began drinking heavily to cope with the stress and sadness. he also began to take out his frustrations on samantha.

i came by her home, feeling as if i had a reason to be there. it was in the midst of one of her father's bouts of rage.

he was hitting her. she was screaming and crying, but there was no one outside of their country home to hear.

then he stopped. he stumbled back.

it seems as if the mixture of unhealthy foods, high blood pressure, constant drinking, resulted in a heart attack for samantha's father.

she is currently in foster care. she is now 13, turning 14 soon.

how could you be this cruel?

daud

dear daud,

as i have said before, i do not have any control over the lives of humans.

i hope samantha can truly find happiness wherever she goes.

i did think i wasn't susceptible to emotion, but i am beginning to feel it. i do not like it at all.

'liv

dear 'liv,

i do too. i hope for the happiness of all humans.

i need to get my mind off of things. tell me more about these stars.

daud

dear daud,

there are many different stars, and each changes throughout its lifetime.

it begins with a stellar nebula. inside the nebula, the gases cause a gravity that brings in the rest of it into either an average star or massive star.

a massive star grows into a red supergiant, and towards the end of the supergiant's lifetime it emits a large supernova, causing the star to collapse into its own gravity and reducing the star to either something with a gravity so great that it sucks in the very light photons that move around it, making a black hole.

a black hole is a dead star, but it somehow still lives on, destroying everything in its path.

thats slightly beautiful.

'liv

dear 'liv,

the black hole reminds me of samantha's deceased twin brothers.

they died, yet their deaths decimated samantha's family.

stars are much like humans, just without souls.

daud

dear daud,

what does the soul of samantha's father tell you?

'liv

dear 'liv,

he speaks of sad things, of pain. he speaks of yearning and confusion. he speaks of the loss of his family.

most of all, he talks about where he went wrong—how he does not know.

he blames himself.

daud

dear daud,

that is quite sad. i am beginning to feel as if all of this is my fault.

i mean, if i weren't here, then there wouldn't be any humans to feel pain.

'liv

dear 'liv,

no. it would be your fault if it was intentional, but it wasn't.

it's not even an accident. it's more like unwilling causation.

daud

dear daud,

you're right. i shouldn't be so hard on myself.

'liv

dear 'liv,

have you thought of seeing a psychiatrist?

daud

dear daud,

it seems as if there are no psychiatrists who are eternally existential but non-existential.

'liv

dear 'liv,

that is very unfortunate. have you tried becoming your own psychologist?

daud

dear daud,

i actually thought about that just now, but no matter my wealth of knowledge, i cannot seem to comprehend or think critically about a lot of the facts i have in store.

i thought i was smart.

'liv

dear 'liv

you are smart. smarter than me.

daud

dear daud,

i don't think so. the humans have this idea of an i.q., and it does not necessarily measure your ability to know facts, but your ability to think about those facts.

i find that i am merely average, while you are several times higher than me.

liv

dear 'liv,

i've been following samantha around. she seems better off. her foster family is quite a change, though.

for once in her life she has support.

samantha likes to pain, and they've bought her many different kinds of paint and large canvas on which she can express herself.

the other day she was painting a beautiful portrait of a woman under water. i cannot help but think that she is that woman.

daud

dear daud,

i am glad that she is doing better than previously. that is very happy news.

i hope she doesn't end up like her parents.

'liv

dear 'liv,

i am glad she is happy once again. painting, reading, and writing all seem to be mediums for her to erode away her frustrations.

i'm starting to like her foster family, but they are of devout catholicism and i think that that belief system is silly. i hate being prejudice but i can't help it.

daud

dear daud,

it's part of life to be judgmental and prejudice. i do not judge you for that. i would actually prefer all of humanity be one religion than of many, and i would prefer that religion be somewhat accurate.

so far it seems as if it is not.

my knowledge is endless, yet, at the same time it is limited. i only know what the humans know, and somewhat more, but my knowledge beyond myself and you is very nonexistent. much like myself, kind of.

'liv

dear 'liv,

i have a relatively similar knowledge base, but i have just yet to obtain it all.

you see, i have to work for my knowledge, i have to learn and listen and show interest in learning. whereas you simply *know*, as if there's some filter and it has to go through you as it passes through human minds.

but also, i can learn of human emotions, from their subjective views. you know none of that; you know only objectivity, and that is why you are so limited.

daud

dear daud,

you are correct. maybe you experience emotion because you have been exposed to them. i am
beginning to experience emotions thanks to you.

thank you.

'liv

dear 'liv,

samantha made another painting. it was of a book, with a page torn in half. on the page that was torn, it had the words "THE EN," and i suspect that it was meant to say "THE END."

this girl has had a lot of experiences with endings in her life. sadly, i have been at them all.

daud

dear daud,

i hate endings. you create them.

i love beginnings. i create them.

'liv

dear life,

i hate endings, for they cause nothing but pain.

two days ago, samantha killed herself. she hung herself from rafters in the attic of her foster parents' home. they just found her today, deathly pale, and dried tears caked across her face. there was no note. there was not ending.

i am not going to end this with a period, because periods signify endings and i do not want our friendship to end. i want it to be immortal, with a definite beginning but no definite end.

i am going to take good care of samantha's soul

daud

THE END